FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Improvements to the Savage East Parking Area Denali National Park and Preserve

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment (EA) that evaluates a project funded by the Federal Highway Administration to upgrade facilities at the Savage East Parking Area (Savage East) at mile 14.7 of the Denali Park Road in Denali National Park and Preserve (Denali). The project is needed due to safety considerations at the existing parking area. To use the parking spaces, the present design requires all vehicles to back up across the incoming vehicular and pedestrian traffic and large vehicles have to back up even when they are just being turned around and are not using a parking space. Backing up large vehicles in a confined area, especially when many visitors have only recently rented the units, puts pedestrians and other vehicles at risk.

The NPS preferred alternative involves redesigning the Savage East parking area to improve visitor parking and existing visitor facilities. The project includes widening the paved area for safer vehicle and pedestrian circulation and parking, constructing permanent toilets and an interpretive kiosk, constructing site trails and a low rock wall at the base of the hillside. A subgrade dig-out of the road base where permafrost has led to subsidence of the road will also be completed. Specifically, development will include:

- reconstructing 345 feet of road base,
- expanding the northern end of the parking lot to allow a vehicle loop turnaround,
- constructing a 250 foot-long protective rock wall to separate the hillslope from the parking area,
- constructing a 120-foot accessible trail to the picnic tables and other facilities,
- constructing two vault toilets ("sweet-smelling toilets" or SSTs) to replace the chemical toilets now in use, and
- constructing a kiosk for display of interpretive materials.

Road and vehicle circulation improvements will require the excavation of approximately 422 cubic yards (cys) of overburden and soils and will require importing 1,300 cys of structural gravel, unclassified borrow and aggregate for asphalt from commercial sources outside the park.

Approximately 100 cys of overburden and soils will be stored on site or trucked to the west end of the Savage Cabin parking area 2 mile east for later use during reclamation of the road and parking lot backslope and fill slope.

The rock wall will be constructed of wire baskets filled with fist-sized rocks. Native soil will then be placed to cover all of the baskets except for the vertical side facing the parking lot.

During the 6-8 week construction period the parking area will be closed and the public will be directed to park at the Savage West parking area.

Alternatives

Two alternatives were evaluated in the EA, in addition to the NPS preferred alternative. Briefly, those alternatives were:

Alternative 1: No-Action. No improvements to the existing conditions at the Savage East parking area would occur under the No-Action alternative. The parking lot would continue with 18 vehicle spaces available; there would be two chemical toilets installed at the beginning of each summer season; a

covered billboard would offer basic park information; the picnic tables would not be connected to the parking lot by an accessible trail; and use of the park road at the entrance to the pullout would resemble a roller-coaster ride for about 100 yards.

Alternative 2: Develop Savage East Parking Area as Outlined in the 1997 Frontcountry Plan. This alternative is based on no change from current management direction. Improvements to the parking area and visitor experience would be limited to previously disturbed ground and would include:

- reconstructing 345 feet of road base,
- formalizing a 40-foot accessible trail to the present location of the picnic tables,
- constructing an interpretive kiosk with designed permanent educational materials, and
- constructing two vault toilets ("sweet-smelling toilets" or SSTs) to replace the chemical toilets now in use.

Approximately 422 cubic yards (cys) of subgrade would be removed and 540 cys of borrow would be obtained for the road construction from outside park sources

During the 4-5 week construction period the parking area would be closed and the public would be directed to park at the Savage West parking area.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

Alternative 2 is identified as the Environmentally Preferred Alternative. This alternative improves the visitor experience and reconstructs the failing road base without disturbing additional park lands. The preferred alternative addresses the chronic safety problem at the site, but at the expense of an additional 0.38 acres of habitat and vegetation disturbed.

Public Involvement

A 30-day public review of the EA was conducted from August 2, 2002 to September 3, 2002. The press release announcing the EA was mailed to local media and the EA was posted on the park's web site and was mailed to 20 agencies, organizations, and individuals. One comment letter was received on the EA. A citizen fully supported the project but requested that the area with the picnic table area be leveled for easier use. The NPS intends to landscape around the picnic tables to create level sites for them as well and to incorporate the new accessible trail.

Mitigation and Monitoring

Mitigation to be taken in conjunction with implementing the NPS preferred alternative includes:

<u>Vegetation</u>. Backslopes and fill slopes disturbed within the project area will be replanted with native vegetation.

<u>Water Resources and Wetlands</u>. Silt fences and straw bales will be placed below the construction site to control and filter runoff to protect water resources and wetlands.

<u>Wildlife and Habitat</u>. The NPS and contractors will follow established guidelines in the park's bear-human conflict management plan. The plan requires operators to use bear-proof containers for food and refuse and sets up guidelines for temporary closures.

<u>Cultural Resources</u>. Surveys for cultural resources have taken place over the past two decades. If previously unknown cultural resources were located during construction, the project will be halted in the discovery area until cultural resource staff could determine the significance of the finding.

<u>Visitor Use</u>. Alternate parking and facilities will be provided at Savage West. Barricades will be placed around the construction sites to prevent visitor entry.

Environmental Consequences of the NPS Preferred Alternative

The NPS has determined that the preferred alternative can be implemented with no significant adverse effect to the natural or cultural resources as documented by the EA and briefly summarized below.

<u>Vegetation/Wetlands</u>. Over half of the 0.38 acres of willow and dwarf birch vegetation disturbed by this project has been degraded over the last 80 years by heavy use at the site. Approximately 0.09 acres of be palustrine scrub shrub broad-leaved deciduous wetlands will be disturbed. Removal of this amount of vegetation and wetlands will have no discernible effect on the community types, which occupies extensive areas of mesic slopes in the Alaska Range. Reclamation of the backslope and fill slope of the pullout road will restore most of the acreage of this community type to be removed under this plan.

The project is excepted from the Statement of Findings requirements to fulfill responsibilities under Executive Order 11990 (Protection of Wetlands) because the NPS guidelines allow for minor (up to 0.1 acre) deviations in the (wetland) footprint of a currently serviceable facility to meet safety requirements.

<u>Wildlife/Habitat</u>. There will continue to be activity avoidance by large mammals, such as will be expected at a heavily visited site. Improvements at Savage East will not significantly alter or remove large mammal habitat options and will not alter or hinder the general movement of prey or predators.

Small mammals will be displaced from the 0.38 acres of newly disturbed area at the project site. Tens of square miles of similar habitat contiguous to and surrounding the development will be available to resident and displaced individuals.

<u>Water Resources.</u> The silt fence and straw bales will slow and filter any dirt loosened by the construction and prevent additional turbidity in the Savage River.

<u>Visitor Experience.</u> The proposed development should have a beneficial effect on visitor enjoyment of the area by creating a safer vehicular circulation pattern both for vehicles parking at the site and for those vehicles pulling through to turn around without stopping. In addition, vehicle and pedestrian circulation and safety will be improved because less mixing of vehicle and pedestrian traffic will occur. The visitor experience will otherwise be improved by fixing the roller-coaster section of road at the entrance to the parking lot, by constructing larger restrooms and by providing accessible trails for people wishing to use the picnic tables or other facilities at the north end of the site.

<u>Park Management.</u> The goal of upgraded facilities in the frontcountry will be met at the site by larger toilets, a more protected display of interpretive materials, and by site landscaping and construction of an accessible trail at the picnic area. The parking area will provide easy circulation for the vehicles using it and will be safer by separating the vehicle area from the pedestrian walkways.

Decision

The National Park Service's decision is to select the NPS preferred alternative. The decision includes mitigation and monitoring measures on vegetation, water resources and wetlands, wildlife and habitat, cultural resources, and visitor use as identified in the FONSI. However, construction will not be limited to the months of August and September in order to secure the best construction bid.

Rationale for the Decision

The NPS preferred alternative is chosen because it best meets the Savage East site objectives and does so with similar or fewer impacts to park resources than other action alternatives. Even though the other alternatives do not disturb new habitat, they do not address the main safety concern of having large vehicles back up to exit a parking space or just to pass through the site. The improved site vehicle circulation pattern will improve the safety of vehicles parking or passing through the site. Other objectives to improve accessibility to the picnic site and to upgrade the interpretive facility and the toilets will also be met by the preferred alternative.

This preferred alternative is consistent with the 1986 Park General Management Plan, the general concepts for visitor facilities in the 1997 Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan/Environmental Impact Statement, and National Park Service Management Policies.

Adverse impacts such as additional noise, large mammal displacement, and closing the site to visitors during construction will be temporary and negligible in effect. These impacts will not result in an impairment of park natural resources fulfilling specific purposes identified in legislation establishing the park or key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park and will not violate the NPS Organic Act.

The preferred alternative complies with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Clean Water Act, and Executive Orders 11988 (Floodplain Management) and 11990 (Protection of Wetlands). There will be no significant restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title VIII, Section 810(a) Summary Evaluation and Findings.

I find that the proposed action does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

Recommended	d:	
	Superintendent, Denali National Park and Preserve	Date
Approved:		
	Regional Director, Alaska Region	Date